

# Using Artificial Intelligence for Peacebuilding

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant need for virtual solutions have created new openings for technology to be put to the service of peace initiatives (The Economist, 2021). The United Nations and its partners have started to use natural language processing and machine learning to dialogue with thousands of individuals in local dialects to identify points of agreement in conflict settings such as Libya and Yemen (The Washington Post, 2021). Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered tools now enable conflict mediators and peacebuilders to dialogue with and poll the public in real time at scale (Financial Times, 2021).

Continuing the series of reflections on big data, new technologies, and sustainable peace (Grunewald & Hedges, 2020; Wählisch, 2020), this practitioner briefing focuses on large-scale digital dialogues conducted by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) in support of peace efforts. The note looks back at the practice of peace polls conducted in the context of Northern

Ireland and highlights operational challenges based on the UN's experience of digital dialogues in Libya since 2020. The authors of this briefing are leading this effort in support of UN missions and conclude with personal thoughts on the way ahead.

## Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Polling Experience

Establishing inclusivity in conflict negotiations is no small task. Peace initiatives are often trapped between pragmatic expediency and the aspiration of enhanced inclusion. On the one hand, dominant parties insist that negotiations be run to their agenda

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and advantage. On the other hand, governments like to maintain full control. But the people are also parties to all conflicts.

In 1996, after 28 years of fighting in Northern Ireland, a group of academics ran what was arguably the first peace-poll that tested options for a negotiated settlement to advance chances for peacebuilding (Hadden et al., 1996). Topics covered included the right to parade, police reform, amnesty for prisoners of the conflict, sharing in schools, public housing and the workplace, and options for a constitutional settlement of the Irish question. All the parties to the negotiations agreed on all the questions asked in the polls. All the parties' constituencies were surveyed, and all the results were made public. This made it impossible for the negotiating parties to dismiss the results. The people of Northern Ireland were effectively given a voice at the negotiating table (Irwin, 2002). The parties slowly learned to trust the peace-polls as the polls also accurately tracked the level of support each party had in local and regional elections. This effort ultimately helped to provide momentum needed to achieve the Belfast Good Friday Agreement and end the war (Irwin, 2002).

Peace polls have continued to play a critical bottom-up function to indicate local perceptions and preferences for peacebuilding directions, including in Macedonia, Cyprus, Israel, Palestine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Southern Thailand, in addition to the Northern Ireland experience. However, dialoguing with 'hard-to-reach' populations in war zones presents significant political, logistical, and security difficulties – not to mention language barriers. This is where AI can help to quickly gather and analyse data from large samples in real time. In the era of emerging technologies, new opportunities for the rapid, flexible, and wide opinion sampling of peace constituencies have become possible that turn peace polls into digital dialogues.

### **New Approaches to Expand Inclusivity Through Emerging Technologies**

Since 2019, UN DPPA has been partnering with the AI-company Remesh to explore the application

of innovative approaches to public surveying in the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Financial Times, 2020). The first experiment was held in May 2019 with the first-ever virtual focus group on peacemaking in the Middle East aimed at better understanding public perceptions related to the conflict in Syria and Yemen, the Middle East peace process (Israel/Palestine), and tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the UN's peace mediation efforts in this context. In 2020 and 2021, UN envoys and missions in Yemen and Libya sought the support of the UN Innovation Cell in DPPA to deploy the Remesh AI-platform as a dialogue tool for the ongoing peace processes in the respective countries.

### *How AI-Assisted Digital Dialogues Work*

On a simple mobile-accessible web interface, the AI platform enables up to 1000 participants to anonymously engage in what we internally call in the UN 'large-scale digital dialogues' or 'digital focus groups'. Participants are invited to select their responses to multiple-choice polling questions. The system also allows open-ended questions that invite participants to freely express their opinions to a particular issue under examination. These responses are shared with the other participants in the dialogue to assess their level of agreement with the proposal. The AI algorithms then processes thousands of data points to produce rank orders of preferred proposals (Bilich et al., 2019).

By identifying and combining actors' identities and their respective voices, the AI application offers a fine-grained picture regarding the topics, themes, and narratives that are important to the different identity groups. In other words, by applying different filters to all the responses, the dialogue moderator sees in real time, for instances how many women, or members of an ethnic minority group express a certain view. Machine Learning and Statistical learning approaches make it possible to identify the most representative verbatims and quantify their representativeness as the dialogue unfolds. That the entire dialogue takes place in locally spoken dialects (e.g., Yemeni Arabic or Libyan Arabic) is a feat of computational linguistics, and one that enables greater inclusivity at that.

Concerning cybersecurity concerns and risks posed by sophisticated malicious actors, Remesh AI takes a multi-facet approach, including security audits and penetration tests to surface and address points of weakness and new attack vectors. In addition, the primary algorithms are designed to minimize the impact individual malicious actors or swarms of bots can have on results, while monitoring the technical infrastructure for anomalous activity.

### *Deploying Large-Scale Digital Dialogues in Libya*

Between October 2020 and January 2021, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) conducted an initial series of five digital dialogues connected to the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). Tasked with taking the Libyan peace process forward, the 75-member LPDF was designed to be inclusive of all main elements of Libyan society. Unlike its Northern Ireland counterpart, however, it lacked the legitimacy of elected members, although it included members of the Libyan House of Representatives and of the High State Council established by the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement. Given the ongoing activity of Libyan militias, free and fair elections would not have been possible, so the UN was obliged to take responsibility for the Forum's composition, which invited criticism from third parties. Against this background, UNSMIL, with the support of the UN DPPA Innovation Cell and Remesh AI conducted five rolled out digital dialogues as part of its public engagement efforts.

The Libyan digital dialogues focused on the impact of the civil war and the ceasefire, domestic militias and foreign fighters, economic issues – including a fair distribution of oil revenues – as well as concerns around human rights and future elections. Diwan, a local polling company, advised the team on the segmentation of the sample. Although Libya is composed of three main historical regions – the East (Cyrenaica), West (Tripolitania), and South (Fezzan) – the ongoing tensions focus mainly along the East and West divide. By asking participants where they were from, it was possible to cross-check the quality of the Dialogue sample with the

known demographics from Diwan's prior research. The digital dialogues allowed UNSMIL to test and validate many assumptions (e.g., widespread public support for a unified currency that could end discrepancies between exchange rates used in the East and West, a development elites grumbled about because it ran against their interests).

By being broadcast on both social media and live TV, the participation of 1000 Libyans in each dialogue was amplified to the wider population. Everyone across Libya could see what suggestions were made and which proposals were identified as points of common ground. Stephanie Williams, the Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General (ASRSG), as the senior most UN Official in Libya, started to moderate the digital dialogues. This further increased their legitimacy, as members of the public saw that they could speak directly to a key actor in the political process.

In the January 2020 digital dialogue, the ASRSG asked Libyan participants what questions they would like to pose to candidates for the Government of National Unity (GNU) during the LPDF elections later that week. The questions collected through the dialogue were later put to the GNU candidates who answered them on live television. These events achieved social media audiences of 1.7 million, a third of the Libyan population. Much to the surprise of the sceptics, the LPDF chose an interim government for Libya on 5 February 2021. Via the digital dialogues and media outreach, including the live broadcast of the LPDF sessions, the election of the GNU by the LPDF appeared to provide some sort of legitimacy, which it had lacked just a few months earlier (Williams & Feltman, 2021). Subsequently, the new government was given the constitutional authority it needed to take the Libyan peace process forward by a vote in the Libyan House of Representatives (HoR) on 15 March 2021.

### **What We Learned and Where We Are Going**

Peace processes are rarely able to draw on inherent authority based on law or tradition. For mediators and peacebuilders, finding acceptance from

relevant stakeholders is thus often a struggle. To secure the acknowledgment of such stakeholders and to establish meaningful outcomes, a peace process must generate a perception of authenticity and procedural fairness. An authority grounded not in power but in conviction. When public voices are strongly represented in a process, this creates a ‘pro-agreement atmosphere’ through wider public buy-in. This also increases how responsive the process is to local needs.

In the 1990s, public opinion peace-polls were used to identify consensus in Northern Ireland as a prelude to the signing of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. This effort was given political legitimacy through its collaboration with the elected members of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue and publication of all the results in the most widely read regional newspaper, the Belfast Telegraph. Similarly, in the 2020s, AI-powered digital dialogues held in the context of the Libyan peace process were used to identify consensus as a prelude to the establishment of a Government of National Unity. This effort was given political legitimacy through its collaboration with UNSMIL and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum which, in turn, gained legitimacy via the dialogues with the Libyan people.

### *Limits of Digital Dialogues*

The limits of digital peacebuilding efforts are manifold, including cybersecurity, the need of participants to have access to both good internet and working devices, and potential cultural, generational or other hurdles in feeling comfortable in using new technologies. The discussion about the risk and benefits of using information and communication technology for peacebuilding (‘ICT4P’) is ongoing with still undiscovered potential (Spillane, 2015).

In the future, more work will be needed to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups in digital dialogues. The Libyan dialogues replicated the gender breakdown we often see in the Libyan cybersphere, with no more than 15% self-identified females participating in any of the 5 dialogues. To generate disaggregated insights on the views of female Libyans and of ethnic

minorities, the project team had to pull out and intensively analyse the smaller set of responses from each of those groups (women, youth, the South, ethnic minorities, etc.). This underlines the reality that AI is not a panacea that can make long-standing societal issues disappear. Still, as we improve the AI platform, its computational capacity will increase. We expect that the upper limit for participants in each dialogue will increase from 1000 to 10,000 individuals by the year-end. We look forward to being able to create real-time quota samples that will greatly increase the efficacy of the platform and its performance outcomes.

### *Technical Capabilities are Growing*

Technical capabilities to employ new technologies for peace efforts are growing rapidly. In our experience, it was possible to run digital dialogues with up to 1000 participants each time in Libya through the Remesh AI system based in New York. This demonstrated the technical success of this approach. AI was effectively used as an outreach tool to increase the engagement of the Libyan population in their peace process. Post-pandemic, we hope to achieve greater public engagement in more conflict contexts with the degree of trust the research team has won through this experience. With that in mind, we hope to apply AI-powered dialogues, with new refinements, wherever peacemakers and peacebuilders are willing to reach and sustain peace by pursuing multiple paths to inclusivity.

We feel that we are still just at the beginning of harvesting the opportunities of new technologies for peace (Masood & Wählisch, 2019). Imagine AI-powered digital dialogues as instruments to consistently measure public needs over time – what if we could better detect patterns of recurrent demands and social fragmentation? What if there were no technical boundaries at all, so that decision makers could engage in large-scale conversations with peace constituencies of any size and in all the multiple dialects spoken in the country?

And of course, technology is a means, not an end. At the centre of all our efforts is a commitment to

do all within our power to reduce conflict, while engendering greater dialogue and participation. May we thus enter a future where greater inclusivity becomes the norm.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

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